

FROM TRIVIAL TO TRAUMATIC

BY

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I would like thank my right hand and forearm.

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Abstract

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From Trivial to Traumatic explores my fixation with the anxieties that result from the ambivalence of my inner-dialogue. I am fascinated with what this insistent self-questioning can reveal about my identity and how mental uneasiness can manifest itself physically. My introversion and obsessive inner-dialogue have inevitably led me to create fictitious self-portraits. In these portraits, my mental angst transforms into physical duress through accidents, mishaps, dismemberment and eventual repair. Many of these self-portraits are large scale, meticulously carved woodcut prints depicting these scenes. The process of print is inseparable from my experiences since the nature of print harbors innumerable minute decisions. My particular interest in this body of work has been with the effort to create woodcut prints that defy the typical marks and style of woodcuts. Inconspicuous unnecessary struggle plays a major role in both the imagery and process of the work. Each print media has its own unique set of marks that help it to be identified, and it is through this jarring of the identity of the print itself, that I find such a rich ground for discussion of the identity of the self.

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I. INTRODUCTION

I have an ongoing fascination with the behavior and identity of those around me. I have always had a difficult time understanding why other people do what they do, even since I was a child. It drives me to unending questions about the idiosyncrasies of others actions and choices. Why is she wearing *that* pair of shoes? Why would anyone buy *this* product? Why would anyone watch *this* show? How could someone believe *that*? Why does he talk *that* way? Why does he stand on the train when seats are available? Why would he sit when standing is an option? Why does he sit or stand *there*? As my focus honed in on the peculiarities of others, I became even more aware of my own proclivities.

Why do I feel the need to ask so many damn trivial questions?

My current work focuses on the anxiety that this incessant questioning produces. My need to question and over-analyze does not revolve around subjects of major importance; rather, it is rooted in the mundane, trivial activities that surround me. Do I go *left* or *right* around this tree? I could go *left*, but, then again, going *right* is also a viable option. Do more people typically go *left* than *right*? Do I want to go the way that *more* people go? Why do more people go *that* way? What's wrong with *this* way? I have become fixated on the anxieties that are result of such an ambivalent inner-dialogue. I am also fascinated by how such mental uneasiness can manifest itself physically. If I am tearing myself apart on the inside, how is this reflected on the outside? What does this insistent questioning reveal about my identity? Why am I compelled to do this?

II. SELF-PORTRAITURE, MENTAL TRAUMA, AND RE-COMPOSURE

My introversion and obsessive inner-dialogue have inevitably led me to create fictitious self-portraits. In these portraits, my mental angst transforms into physical duress through accidents, mishaps, dismemberment and eventual repair. The most minor of dilemmas can literally wreak havoc on the entire human form, ripping it apart. I find an odd amusement in dismemberment, particularly when the figure at risk is a representation of myself. In several of the portraits, a part of my body such as the arm, head, leg, hand or fingers has been detached. At the points of detachment, both the severed appendages and the body itself appear to spill out an internal substance which is composed entirely of beans. Most of the images lack explanation as to the source of this traumatic output, leaving the viewer to contemplate its origin. Without a violent catalyst for this dismemberment, the images therefore depict more of a playful non-threatening trauma. My head has not been *cut* off, it has *fallen* off. The dog has not *mauled* my arm off; he simply *helps* me carry it as my only other hand holds his leash.

These self portraits are large scale, meticulously carved woodcut prints depicting these scenes. The image is delineated with clean illustrational line work, which separates the composition between figure and ground. The subject matter in each image remains devoid of color, whereas the large amount of negative space surrounding the forms is typically printed in a highly saturated color. The figures in my prints are devoid of color which may stem from an obsession that I have with mannequins. They possess the bizarre ability to instruct us in our daily decisions such as fashion choices, yet they are immobile, inanimate objects. They are also typically incomplete figures, often lacking hands, whole appendages, and most interestingly, the vast majority is often headless. I identify with this lack of wholeness. I feel it is almost

impossible to fully understand myself, as I can never have an impartial outside perspective. Perhaps this means that I will be the last person who will understand who I am?

When I depict a figure in print, the figure appears devoid of color, as do the margins, drawing similarities between the ways I depict myself with that of the unknown world surrounding me which I constantly strive to understand. I draw my images primarily through clean illustrational line work. Line is portrayed boldly, almost didactic in its cleanliness. I derived this style shortly after I became obsessed with the mannequin as a potential subject. The line quality is derived from studying every-day didactic illustrations from a variety of sources, often in regards to human health and wellbeing. These are the types of illustrations that accompany safety equipment such as goggles or respirator masks, or even more common items such as band-aids or socks. My aim is to portray my concept in the cleanest, most easily readable format.

Offsetting the white depictions of figures (in the woodcuts) are often large highly saturated color fields. I enjoy balancing these didactic depictions of traumatic physical events with these large highly saturated color fields as they give a place for the eye to get lost. I do not see this negative space as a place of rest for the eye, but rather a space just as equally tense as the line work. I enjoy the viewing experience itself to be reminiscent of my experiences; to be torn between focusing on line or space. If the viewer physically experienced this visual ambivalence, then my image has succeeded.

To counter-act the large scale vivid woodcut images of trauma, are modestly sized screenprints. I depict myself attempting to put myself back together in these prints. I sew dismembered limbs back on, and pick up the pieces of myself that have been strewn around me. My body is once again complete and composed except for the stitches of thread. These portraits

are printed in layers on a synthetic translucent paper; the resulting images are soft and calming in their muted monochromatic color schemes. These images are clean in their representation of the self, not one stray bean is present and there are no severed limbs lying about; all have been returned to their rightful internal locations. I find this struggle between states of dismemberment and composure rhythmic; with each equally feeding and growing off of the other.

Having numerous unanswered questions about my identity, I feel extreme comfort when surrounded by objects that are perhaps just as enigmatic as I feel. I stress this connection by incorporating imagery depicting numerous antiquated objects; including cars, furniture, a variety of common household appliances, among others. To incorporate these antiquated objects into my prints, I find it most rewarding to physically have the object that I desire to depict. In most cases, these objects have been purchased in second hand or antique stores throughout my life. There has to be some reason that I not only acquired these specific objects, but furthermore, there has to be some reason why I have kept them for extended periods of time. I believe that the answer to this question lies within the objects discarded and therefore their enigmatic history. Who owned this suitcase before I did? Where has it been? What has it carried? Because I will never know the answers to these questions, I feel a strange bond to these cast-away objects.

I also depict animals with me in my self-portraits. Some of these animals are wildlife, while the domestic animals are my own pets. While I do find animals to have extensive healing abilities to the distressed individual, they can also add to my anxiety. Do they really need me, or could someone else care for them? Do they even need a person at all, or just a hand to feed them? Which hand; right or left? Do they need the whole hand, or just the fingers? Which fingers?

Depicting odd or unusual creatures, which appear to have a bit of an identity crisis of their own, such as the ostrich, is another way I personify my anxieties and awkwardness. The ostrich is a paradox within itself, it's a bird, it has wings, but it can't fly. It remains forever grounded, no matter how hard it flaps its stubby wings. I also seek companionship with excessive, almost threatening, quantities of nocturnal animals, such as mice, or rabbits. I enjoy the nocturnal animal as it functions when the rest of life rests. When your eyes are closed, its eyes are open. I utilize these animals as metaphor to open my eyes to the unknown things which surround me.

Another reoccurring motif is that of a small ginkgo tree. As ginkgo holds obvious connections to memory (both loss or retaining of) I have stripped the identifying leaves off of the ginkgo tree, and depict it in its perpetually awkward leafless state. In two particular images, some form of transportation that I was operating has made contact with this tree as a result of my ambivalence. The tree that is depicted is always the same representation, it is never drawn from another angle, it is always precisely the same obstacle that keeps confronting me. Furthermore, the tree is central to a series of embossings titled *Tree Fight* in which I (unsuccessfully) attempt to destroy this reoccurring obstacle. Obstacles such as the tree represent the things that I struggle with; my anxieties, introversion, ambivalence, etc. They are the things that stand in my way, and although I loath them, I possess no desire to destroy them entirely. For without these obstacles that give rise to my idiosyncrasies, would I still find myself interesting?

The quest for understanding myself has led to my unique depiction of what lies inside. Stemming from the phrase repeated numerous times throughout my life, I depict myself, quite literally full of beans. The beans represent the unknown, the foreign, or the unattainable. I struggle to understand why I am the way that I am, and end up full of anxiety about the questions

that I cannot answer. Additionally, the bean motif may be seen in other unattainable areas in the images, in one instance they take place of an engine in an automobile that I no longer have physical contact with.

The trivial decisions that lead way to these humorous depictions of trauma surround me every second of the day. I am overly aware of their presence, and fixating on them often leads me to a state of temporary physical paralysis. Upon realization of this specific personal phenomenon, I began the series with a drawing for the print "*Twenty-Three*". In this image, I am depicted casually seated upright in a chair, with my head having fallen off and lying by my feet, while beans spill out of my neck and down to the floor. This feeling of temporary physical paralysis has strong connections to existentialism, and particularly to Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea*. The main character, Antoine Roquentin, describes similar experiences through diaristic format. He begins his journaling by describing a fear of the small happenings and details around him escaping his memory. His journaling quickly becomes incessant, and he begins describing the minute details of his surroundings until he is physically overcome with nausea.

When Roquentin interacts with objects or people that surround him, he observes them in great detail. He frequently becomes fixated with his own reflection in mirrors and is unable to determine whether he is handsome or ugly. He becomes so enveloped in his inner-dialogue that often it seems to remove him from the physical realm. A specific instance in the novel that I hold particularly deep interest in is Roquentin's reaction to a barman named Adolphe. In a bout of nausea, Roquentin physically cannot turn his head, and is forced to stare at length at Adolphe. He begins to describe his attire in great detail;

"He is in shirtsleeves, with purple suspenders; he has rolled the sleeves of his shirt above the elbows. The suspenders can hardly be seen against the blue shirt, they are all obliterated, buried in the blue, but it is false humility; in fact, they will not let themselves be forgotten, they annoy me by their sheep-like stubbornness, as if, starting to become purple, they stopped somewhere along the way without giving up their pretensions. You feel like saying, "All right,

become purple and let's hear no more about it." But now, they stay in suspense, stubborn in their defeat. Sometimes the blue which surrounds them slips over and covers them completely: I stay an instant without seeing them. But it is merely a passing wave, soon the blue pales in places and I see the small island of hesitant purple reappear, grow larger, rejoin and reconstitute the suspenders."¹

I find the amount of analysis and energy that is expelled here within the simple observation another person's attire to be extremely engaging. This process of being so enveloped by two colors, and to have such internal struggle simply trying to visually delineate the two, is something that I am interested in portraying in my work. Because of the numerous moments such as this in the novel, *Nausea* resonates throughout many of my images.

III. PRINT PROCESS AS CATALYST FOR PARALYSIS

Just as the process of trying to understand myself is integral to my imagery, so to are the processes I use to make my work. I have worked in several different media in the past, including photography and ceramics, but am so drawn to print for its "betweenness"² It is "between art and craft, between image and technology of reproduction, between direct and indirect touch, between black and white, between freedom and limitations, between original conception and accidental results of the process, between the "certainty" of the technique and the "uncertainty" of the motivation which compels artists to make multiples of their images"³. Furthermore, there are numerous print processes to choose from, each holding (for me) a paralyzing treasure trove of decisions to be made. What process do I want to use? What marks do I want to make? What tools will I use? What size will it be? Will I press print or hand print?

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2007), 19.

² Ondrej Michalek, "The Art of Printmaking as Image Rather than Technique", in *Sightlines: Printmaking and Image Culture*, ed. Walter Jule (Alberta: The University of Alberta Press, 1997), 188.

³ Ondrej Michalek, 188.

What paper do I want to use? What size will the edition be? How big will the margins be? How many colors do I want? Where do I even want color? Which shade of green is the right one? Behind each one of these questions that I routinely ask myself are seemingly infinite amounts of decisions that have to be made. Inevitably, when standing alone surrounded by a field of these minute decisions, paralysis rears its lovely head once again.

I have chosen the woodcut as a central process to my work, as the natural qualities of wood make it an extremely challenging material to work with. I am interested in exploring how such an antiquated medium can still retain its validity in contemporary times. In my current woodcut work, I am particularly interested in the effects of creating woodblock prints that defy typical woodcut marks and style. Each print media has its own unique set of marks that help it to be identified, and it is through this jarring of the identity of the print itself, that I find an excellent ground for discussion of the identity of the self.

I have spent the better part of the past year and a half investigating how to create such marks in woodcut prints that defy the expected. I probably could have created these images as large screenprints in my sleep over a weekend, but this is not what interests me. The easy road bores me and where I become engaged is when there are significant challenges to investigate. My aim was in making large woodcut prints that looked as simple and clean as screenprints. The marks I sought after were possible with Proxxon and Flexcut tools, and thousands of hours of neurotic carving. I wanted my end result to be didactic and clean, with very intense underlying labor backing this simplicity. This inconspicuous unnecessary struggle plays a major role in both the imagery and process of the work.

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